

Bossler, Beverly (ed.): *Gender and Chinese History. Transformative Encounters.* Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2015, 266 pp., ISBN 978-0-295-99470-3.

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DOI 10.1515/asia-2016-0016

On the back cover of this rich collection of essays a quote by Catherine Carlitz describes it as including “stars” whose texts “people are going to want to read.” Indeed, a brief look at the list of contributors to the volume is enough to classify it as doomed to succeed. The authors are all well-established senior scholars of Chinese history, who are also known for their adherence to the gender-oriented perspective in Chinese Studies.

Beverly Bossler, the editor of the volume and author of the introductory chapter, has grouped the nine essays into three chronological sections, each of which allows a glimpse into a distinct moment in Chinese history: the eighteenth century, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the latter half of the twentieth century. Bossler promises in her Introduction (pp. 3–17) that all texts in the volume contribute new insights to the already much-studied topics of the history of Chinese femininities and masculinities. Furthermore, the opening section of her chapter demonstrates a strong methodological awareness and dedication to conceptual precision. She ponders the meanings of “history”, “gender”, and “China” in order to remind the readers that their understanding of these terms is never universal, but always caught within a temporal and spatial setting. Consequently, our perception of this terminological constellation may change as we gain new insights. In tune with Bossler’s claim, this collection of groundbreaking essays delivers enough inspiration not only for expanding gender-related historic studies in new directions, but also for questioning some of the well-established assumptions within the academic field, as well as popular gender stereotypes.

The most telling examples, all highly pertinent to the aforementioned revision of gender clichés may be found in the second part of the volume, which contains three essays discussing the transition of “genteel ladies” or “talented women” of the late imperial period into emancipated New Women of the Republican era. These texts all claim that already in the 1870s a new hybrid femininity had been taking shape when women with the right material means or education learned to make use of the opportunities brought by modernization

processes. They published their poetry in new media, such as newspapers and literary supplements (Ellen Widmer, Chapter 5) or rose to immense economic power within the household and family enterprises (Yan Wang, Chapter 7). Both texts critically scrutinize and implicitly oppose the image of Chinese women as immobile victims cloistered in the inner quarters of the patriarchal home. They share this critical outlook with other essays collected in the first two parts of the volume, which may all be seen as belonging to the lineage of scholarship established by Dorothy Ko with her inquiry into the intellectual life of the inner chambers (1994) as well as into the practice of foot-binding (2005). Furthermore, none of the texts in the volume discusses gender as an isolated phenomenon, but, on the contrary, as always intersecting with other factors, among which class figures most prominently.

Many of the essays in this collection prove that intersectionality has become a common paradigm within gender scholarship. The most interesting example may be found in Yulian Wu's study (Chapter 3) on the performance of masculinity by late-Qing affluent merchants. Although, in light of the numerous studies on especially queer masculinities throughout Chinese history, I am hesitant to accept Wu's claim that manhood has been an understudied topic, she is indeed right in her claim that scholars have so far focused mainly on educated men (*literati*). Her own study, on the contrary, opens new perspectives for studying gender constructions by a different social class and by different means, i. e., material wealth and ownership. Apart from class, gender is also discussed in the volume as entangled with ethnicity (Guotong Li, Chapter 2). Drawing upon examples from Fujian and Taiwan Li sheds light on the tangle of gender, ethnicity and government politics.

The third part of the collection includes two essays which revisit the Mao era and question its present legacies. While the two first parts of the volume may be easily linked together, this part, with its focus on ideological campaigns in twentieth-century China, stands on its own. Its interest in the topic of women's labor is shared with Chapter 2, but more important than a simply thematic overlap is an original take on methodology that these two modern essays have in common with previous ones. Emily Honig (Chapter 8) shows in her discussion of perhaps the most popular slogan of state-led emancipation under Mao, "times have changed; men and women are the same", that the real "life of the slogan" significantly differs from the taken-for-granted legend beyond it. The last chapter in the collection by Gail Hershatter is closely related to her most recent publication, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (2011) and includes some of the author's afterthoughts on intergenerational transmission of memories.

The entire collection of essays is dedicated to Susan Mann, Professor Emerita of Chinese history, who devoted her academic career to the study of

the lives of Chinese women. Not surprisingly, many of the topics discussed have been crucial to Mann's scholarship, e. g. marriage, dowry or ethnicity in Qing China. The contributions prove that her academic interest has been carried further and also point to the gaps that need to be filled in future.

As I have already mentioned, the volume was compiled by senior scholars in the field, so the quality of the essays remains, not surprisingly, very high. Moreover, the publication exemplifies thoughtful and careful editing. It not only includes a glossary and a chronological table of Chinese dynasties, but also a very helpful note on terminology regarding the imperial examination system. Nevertheless, the usual fragmentary nature of conference volumes, as well as the tendency of the authors to refer to their own and others' previous publications, renders this collection less accessible to the lay reading public and students. It assumes a certain previous knowledge of the academic field. Consequently, while not necessarily suitable as the first read, it will turn into a rewarding and inspiring lecture in the hands of advanced graduate students and academics in the fields of Chinese history and literature.